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THE MONSTER: ARISHIMA IKUMA AND THE NEGATIVE MASTER

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Arishima Takeshi, a wealthy and successful civil servant, had seven children of whom three made something of a literary career. Arishima Takeo, the eldest, hardly needs introduction, while Hideo, the youngest of the three, is better known as Satomi Ton. The second, Mibuma, who, under the name Ikuma, became a painter, poet, writer of travelogues and art critic, is certainly the most obscure of the three.

Yet Ikuma too had enjoyed a certain celebrity in the prewar period, especially as art-columnist for the *Shirakaba* magazine which flourished between 1910 and 1923. The Shirakaba group is known today as one of the literary coteries in the broad anti-naturalist movement which started with the Taishō period and ended, forgotten, in the tragic turmoil of World War II. All thirteen Shirakaba founders were graduates of the exclusive Peer's School. To their contemporaries, the name "Gakushūin" meant either noble birth or considerable wealth and an assured future in some enviable profession; but above all it meant freedom, the greatest privilege of all in a constrictive, rigidly stratified society which had not yet managed to shake off the duty-obsessed mentality of the Meiji period. Those contemporaries who were denied such freedom themselves tended to condemn it as caprice, hedonism or even as an inevitable descent into vice, and thus the first Shirakaba members were believed to have taken to literature as a way of escaping boredom or because they were no good at anything else. None of the rival groups—Mito, Subaru, Araragi, Shinchō—was ready to believe that the literary vocation of the Shirakaba might possibly be serious. One of the reasons why the Shirakaba group remained an isolated movement, why it was never tempted to form alliances or be drawn into some anti-naturalist front, was that the various degrees of suspicion they discerned in others made such alliances impossible from the start.

Arishima Ikuma was born in Yokohama in 1882, which makes him one of the oldest members of the Shirakaba group. He died in Tokyo in

1974 at the venerable age of ninety-two after a thoroughly enjoyable and active life. And indeed, his professional life had started under the best auspices. At the age of twenty, he came across a Japanese Catholic priest who spoke to him of the beauty of Italy and its art. This one fleeting conversation made him choose to become a painter, a decision he would never regret. With this in view, he studied Italian at the Foreign-Language School in Tokyo and graduated with honours in 1905. Only a year later we find him in Rome, an art student at the Regia Accademia dell'Arte, and by 1907 he was in Paris. There he would spend the rest of his four-year stay in Europe, a Japanese Parisian in the midst of other Japanese expatriate painters: Minami Kunzō, Umehara Ryūsaburō, Takamura Kōtarō, Saitō Nobusatō, Fujishima Takeji, Ogiwara Morie, Yamashita Shintarō. With them or alone he visited Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Germany and England. In autumn 1908 he discovered his master at the first posthumous exhibition of Cézanne; and it was through articles on Cézanne that his reputation as a champion of Post-Impressionism became established after his return to Japan. To his less fortunate contemporaries, this trajectory seemed entirely in line with the golden lifestyle of a Shirakaba youth, but in fact Ikuma's uncomplicated nature, singleness of purpose and especially, his extraordinary diligence stand in contrast to the existential anxieties and doubts that eroded so many Shirakaba talents. Not all Shirakaba members went to Europe even though they could afford it; in most cases such journeys were feared, eternally postponed and, when accomplished, rarely enjoyed. Monolingualism and timidity, the sad traits that belie the cosmopolitan reputation of the Shirakaba, never seemed to have affected Ikuma, a man who knew how to enjoy himself and make good use of his time.

During his five-year stay, he is said to have learned French (though phrases like "Monsieur! N'allez-pas-y!" may raise a few eyebrows) and even to have acquired a smattering of German and English. He mixed with foreigners easily and his insatiable curiosity about foreign lives was not hampered by the fears or inferiority complexes that afflicted men like Mushanokōji Saneatsu, the spiritual leader of the Shirakaba group. In 1936, "Musha" would move through Europe as if it were a hostile place, never daring to speak to anyone for fear of ridicule and sticking to his schedule for dear life. Thirty years earlier, Ikuma was not only undisturbed by his singularity, but even seemed to enjoy it when, like royalty on a state visit, he saw himself taken to places of interest by a retinue of local

notables (constables, mayors, state foresters) and would not hesitate to change trains, shorten or prolong a stay on the spur of the moment. His European wanderings remained his main source of inspiration throughout his life and his travelogues continued to appear long after his return to Japan. In 1927 his name entered the encyclopedia of Japanese authors *Gendai Nihon Bungaku Zenshū* and a year later he was invited back to Paris to receive the medal of the *Légion d'honneur* for his services to Franco-Japanese cultural relations.

The Monster bears the subtitle *European Notes, No 3*, which implies that what follows is likely to be a true story.¹ It is set in Switzerland and the first-person narrator, a painter who lives in Paris, is obviously a version of Ikuma himself. It begins with the account of a one-month stay at Glion near Lausanne, where he happens to meet an old couple and their daughter, who turn out to be members of the Pestalozzi family. The father, in fact, is the grandson of the famous educator Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827). But there is something strange, almost sinister about them and the narrator suspects a family secret or some inherited illness. He somehow feels that their great ancestor must be the remote cause of their unhappiness. He leaves Glion and pursues his exploration of Switzerland as if he had cancelled the whole Pestalozzi episode from his mind, but this is far from the case. He himself has, in a way, been infected with the Pestalozzi malady and his itinerary is now ruled by the spirit of a dead man. Almost unconsciously, he follows the Pestalozzi trail until he is drawn towards a villa in a Zurich suburb. This is the home of the Pestalozzis he had met in Glion two months before, and there he finally comes face-to-face with the last offspring of the family, a dangerous, raving dwarf.

This “monster”, who seems to have been waiting for his moment right from the start, makes us realize that the text we have been reading is not so much a personal travelogue but rather a visionary recollection of Europe as a whole, written not for a large public but for a small group of intimate friends at home. That touch of clannish *entente*, that subtle codified language which excludes the common reader and makes him feel like an intruder, is present here as in most Shirakaba writings. Thus Arishima knew very well what his Shirakaba friends wanted to know before venturing to Europe themselves. He knew their fear of the unknown, their

1 Original title: *Jūnin, Tai-Ō ki sono mittsu*, 1911. See reference in Bibliography, ARISHIMA 1911.

unease with strangers, and his first task was, therefore, to reassure them. In this he may well have been helped by the conventions of European travelogues which, in Claude Reichler's phrase, were gradually turning into a collection of ethnopsychological samples.² The emergence of mass-tourism had become an obstacle to cultural exchange and, in fact, produced a tendency to view *the other* according to a codified scheme of ethnic stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes emerge in Arishima's story: the flirtatious Italian youth, the boring German lady, the eccentric and somewhat disoriented American globetrotter—but what about the Swiss? Swiss national identity had remained a vague concept even in Arishima's time. He was quite aware of the problem, but was quick enough to exploit one of the most prominent Swiss topoi, frequent in travelogues from the seventeenth century onward. This topos concerned the "cretins" born on high plateaux, goitrous dwarfs with impaired speech, often unable to eat unless spoon-fed, objects of superstitious worship in remote Alpine villages.³

Through this topos Arishima could construct a plot which gradually distances itself from the travelogue-form and turns into something else. While at the beginning the tourist-narrator's credibility is not imperiled by any exceptional event, the story becomes more incredible as we go along and passes imperceptibly through several subgenres of fiction: mystery, detective story and Gothic thriller. The underlying meaning is not difficult to detect: the oppressive respectability, efficiency and order of Switzerland is, in fact, that of a family which hides its monsters in a closet.

To build a story with the Pestalozzi family as protagonist was an equally crafty move. In search of a recognizably Swiss figure, he could find no one better than Pestalozzi, the great educator, who was the most famous Swiss known in Japan. In a country still ruled by prescriptive teaching methods, every European novelty in this field held a great fascination for Japanese intellectuals, and especially for the Shirakaba group. Always on the look for new existential choices and masters of life, they could not fail to be interested in an eccentric educator like

2 See REICHLER 1998, pp.11–19.

3 On the "cretins", see *ibid.*, pp. 132, 339–42, 350–3, 954, with citations from Daniel the HERMIT (1604), M.T. BOURRIT (1776), H. B. DE SAUSSURE (1786) and CHATEAUBRIAND (1832).

Pestalozzi—especially since his failure was an undisputable historical fact. As Arishima knew full well, his Shirakaba colleagues loved failed heroes.

Arishima, however, is not saddened by the destiny of Pestalozzi for, as the story gradually reveals, the educator's failure is a justified revenge of nature over the constraints of human intentions. Arishima maintains that nature is the teacher of truth and, therefore, not to be tampered with. In *Bōju no shinrin* (The Vosges Forest), a travelogue written shortly before *The Monster*, Rousseau is mentioned as having reached peace only when he became a botanist while living by the lake of Bienne. In the eyes of Ikuma and his Shirakaba colleagues, truth is to be found only in regions where words are unknown; mute and illiterate, nature leaves no messages on the bark of trees or in the voice of the thunder, but its speechlessness is instructive just the same. As in Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, nature's very indifference and lack of consciousness has the power to "repeal large codes of fraud and woe", that is, the false theories constructed by philosophers and educators such as Heinrich Pestalozzi. There is too much intentionality, too much zeal both in Pestalozzi's attempts to rise above his own human mediocrity and in his ambitious plans to improve the younger generation. An exercise in self-improvement puts nature under scrutiny and forces it into the straitjacket of human will. Hence, in Ikuma's story, the memory of the virtuous grandfather Pestalozzi is sapping the vitality of his progeny; it is unhealthy and burdensome, the source of a perpetual inferiority complex. This vague hostility towards the patriarch emerges for the first time in the conversation between Mrs Pestalozzi and the narrator. But he still does not know that the old lady has recently been deliberately disfigured by her youngest son. Still regarding it as an accident, he tries to console her as best he can:

"You've been very unfortunate, haven't you? Such a terrible accident. It must have affected Mademoiselle Tilde too. She seems so worried about you."

"Oh no, she's not. Human hearts are tougher than you think."

"But nature is also just, isn't it? Surely, your grandfather-in-law must have thought so. Provided there is faith and love, humans can rescue each other, or at least console each other in times of woe ..."

"Is God just?"

From the sudden consternation caused by the question, the narrator understands that God is a taboo topic in the Pestalozzi family and that he has met

three people on the verge of unbelief. Their display of Christian piety and of veneration for the famous grandfather is nothing but ostentatious conformism to their established social role. Misfortune has destroyed their faith and pride; and it is to discover what terrible event has changed them so much that the narrator starts following the trail of the dead Pestalozzi. We need only look more closely at the episode in Yverdon to see how Ikuma constructs Pestalozzi as a failed master. The Yverdon school, we read, was made to shelter the many juvenile delinquents of the region and got covered with obscene graffiti within a week of its inauguration; it is now a run-down one-floor building, having remained in function for only a short time—apparently a month or two, although Ikuma remains rather vague. As for the inhabitants of Yverdon, they have entirely forgotten Pestalozzi, and his monument is for them only a big, pompous “lump of bronze”. Ikuma’s intentions become obvious when we compare his fiction with the known facts. The Pestalozzi school was founded in 1805 and continued to function for twenty years. At first, it was indeed housed in a small building in Rue du Four, but then, after a few weeks, moved to the most prestigious building in Yverdon: the 13th century castle in the town centre. Moreover, the Pestalozzi monument never stood in the Place d’Armes, but on the castle square now called Place Pestalozzi, under the very windows of the former school. Far from being a failure, the school was a great success for at least fifteen years, and its pupils, far from being the local juvenile delinquents, were the fee-paying sons of wealthy magistrates and merchants from Germany, France, England, Italy, Spain and of course, Switzerland. The school’s renown declined only around 1820, when internal dissensions and the advanced age of Pestalozzi himself started undermining his authority. Deprived of funds and deserted, it was closed down in 1825. Pestalozzi himself would die penniless two years later at his home in the canton of Aargau.

Other data in the story are equally unreliable. The true grandson of the master was Gottlieb Pestalozzi (1798–1863), whose only son Karl died unmarried and childless in 1891. There was, therefore, no Pestalozzi grandson or great-grandson alive in the years 1907–1910. Nor is there any Pestalozzi from some lateral branch known to have had an idiot son. Moreover, “Neuhof”, mentioned in the text as the name of a villa in the Zurich suburbs, is in fact the name of the very first Pestalozzi foundation (a home for vagrant children built in 1774) and still extant as a school for children with learning difficulties. Yet it is not in Zurich, but in Birr, some

twenty miles away in the canton of Aargau. There is, in any case, no “Villa Neuhof” in Zurich.

In a story that adopts the form of a travelogue, the boundary between fact and fiction may be less than obvious. If we assume that Ikuma is right when he says that Evian is visible across the lake of Geneva, or that Yverdon is a spa on the lake of Neuchâtel, it is because this kind of information is, of its nature, verifiable. But Heinrich Pestalozzi existed no less surely than Evian or Yverdon and thus what is said of Pestalozzi should also be verifiable. How are we to know that this Pestalozzi and his descendants are figures of fiction? Very few of Ikuma’s Japanese readers would have been in any position to challenge the reliability of an account that was published as an extract from his European diary and that, in its accumulation of seemingly irrelevant topographical detail, disguises its darker fictional purpose. The inescapable conclusion must be that Ikuma wanted and expected his readers to believe him. What, we may ask, lies behind this deliberate deception?

The fact is that Ikuma dislikes Switzerland and needs a celebrated Swiss name to represent a country which, he feels, is good for a short holiday but must eventually be abandoned in a hurry. Switzerland is like the “burning house” in the famous Buddhist parable. The gloomy Pestalozzi residence (“the burning house”) and the many hints about crushed and unhappy lives (the daughter who laughs and does not speak, the “madman’s room” of the absentee eldest son) serve to stress the image of Switzerland as a place unfit for average humans, a country whose grandiose scenery tends to inspire either excessive humility or excessive courage. To sum up, not only is Ikuma’s story a false travelogue, but it also recalls a Greek tragedy where *hubris* is punished by the gods. Here, the role of the revengeful gods is given to Mother Nature; and the birth of an idiot child to terminate a glorious family line is given as an example of the “stern decrees” by which Nature restores its authority over the will of man.⁴

4 Today the castle of Yverdon houses the Pestalozzi Centre of Documentation and Research. For information on the Pestalozzi foundations in Yverdon and Birr, as well as on Pestalozzi and his descendants, I am most grateful to the Centre’s founder and curator, Mme Françoise Waridel.

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